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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to discredit the theory held by many educational psychologists and found most prominently in works by Bereiter and Engelmann, that lower class children are verbally deprived. The author reports on an experiment conducted by the staff of the Southwest Educational Laboratory among lower socioeconomic class children in Watts and neighboring areas of Los Angeles. Their findings conflict with Bereiter and Engelmann's in demonstrating that such children are able to ask questions of several types, to give explanations, to draw inferences, to exchange and give information, and to use complex sentences. It is suggested that group interviews are most successful in eliciting language from these children and that faulty interviewing techniques may account for the results obtained by Bereiter and Engelmann. Finally the author warns that if linguists, whose primary task is to show how children learn and use language, do not take the lead in demonstrating the invalidity of the theory of verbal deprivation, they may be considered passive contributors to "institutionalized racism," which is manifested "when the social scientist enshrines canons of objectivity and academic detachment to a point where the meaningful or insightful study of human affairs is precluded." (FWB)

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On the Contribution of the Linguist to Institutionalized Racism[1]

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In a famous article entitled 'Language', Edward Sapir wrote in 1933 that:

> The gift of speech and a well ordered language are characteristic of every known group of human beings. No tribe has ever been found which is without language, and all statements to the contrary may be dismissed as mere folklore ... The truth of the matter is that language is an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people (Sapir 1968:7).

Linguists have universally accepted Sapir's maxim. However, many psychologists and educators have theorized or concluded from limited observation that the language of lower-class members of certain minorities is less complex in syntax, lexicon, and logic than that of others. Thus, Bereiter, et al (1966:112-113) conclude that the language of lower-class black and Mexican-American children is not even an 'underdeveloped version of standard English, but is a basically nonlogical mode of expressive behavior which lacks the formal properties necessary for the organization of thought.' Deutsch (1966:89) concluded that the language of such speakers is deficient in 'syntactic organization'. Warren Cutts (1963:23), then a reading specialist in the U.S. Office of Education, asserted that the language of 'culturally disadvantaged' children is limited to 'grunts and crudities' and composed of 'strange noises that take the place of standard American English. . . .'

One can find all sorts of claims and counterclaims in any literature. The societal problem is that theories of verbal deprivation continue to stand in the way of vigorous searches for the real causes of academic failure on the part of children whose backgrounds are in the lower socioeconomic classes. If theories of verbal deprivation do not hold water,

then it behooves linguists to take the lead in demonstrating the invalidity of such theories. For if these theories are incorrect and yet attract a measure of attention among educators, then they contribute to what is coming to be called institutionalized racism. If linguists are in a good position to set the record straight and do not do so, then it is perhaps not too harsh to judge them passive contributors to institutionalized racism.

This paper reports evidence that is inconsonant with theories of verbal deprivation and then offers an explanation for differences between present findings and those of the verbal deprivation theorists.

The evidence consists of speech samples tape-recorded during a preliminary sociolinguistic survey conducted by staff at the Southwest Regional Laboratory among 30 lower sccioeconomic class Negro children randomly chosen from Watts and neighboring areas in Los Angeles. The original sample contained 30 children aged five to nine. It was possible to show that 17 of these children had not had the doubtful benefits of 'remedial language programs'; the speech samples described here are among those obtained from these 17 children. Here I shall contrast findings from this work with those of Carl Bereiter and Seigfried Engelmann because their publications are widely cited in the literature and

because their remedial language programs have been adopted by many Operation Head Start programs and other 'compensatory education programs' across the country.

Bereiter and Engelmann (1968:5) assert that lower-class Negro and Mexican-American children have 'not learned the language rules that are necessary for . . . drawing inferences; for asking questions, and for giving explanations.' They further claim (1968:19) that 'The child often has no idea of how to ask questions or what they can do for him.' Item 1 below displays a rich variety of questions gathered from our sample. There are yes-no questions, a large variety of WH-questions, etc.

1) Questions

Yes-No

1. Is that the same thing as that one? (Mona, 1-1-03, 19-20)
2. She wake you up with a belt? (Mona, 1-2-03, 6-7)
3. Do you want your money back? (Mona, 1-2-03, 7-8)
4. Toni, remember when you was standing by that door? (Yvette, 2-3-4, 5)

WH-

1. Why you tell that to your mother and your daddy? (Mona, 1-2-03, 6-7)
2. Where we going? Well when they go why don't we go? (Elliott, 2-5-01, 2)
3. How old are you, eight? (Yvette, 2-3-04, 2)
4. What if they hear that belch on the tape recorder? (Yvette, 2-3-4, 4)
5. Where's mine? (Yvette, 2-3-4, 6)
6. Who said those names? (Jocelyn, 3-1-05, 3-4)
7. Now, girl, what you be doing that for? (Jocelyn, 3-1-05, 3-4)
8. Why you say you already got it, stupid? (Phillip, 4-1-03, 1-5)
9. Where the belt--the belts at? (Aubrey, 6-2-5, 1)
10. Oh, what's that other picture called? (Aubrey, 6-1-05, 4)

Embedded

1. I saw this girl on TV and, and that man said, 'What do Santa Clause do when he come to your house?' (Yvette, 2-3-4, 3)
2. You remember what the man said? (Jocelyn, 3-1-05, 7-8)
3. Hey, hey, he said, 'You know what we did?' (Thomas, 2-3-08, 23-24)

Tag

1. Carlton, like Alisa, don't you? Don't you? (Yvette, 2-3-04, 1-2)

As a counter-example to the claim that lower-class children cannot give explanations, Item 2 gives an example of a five-year-old girl explaining to a friend how her hair is put up.

2) Explanation (Mona, 1-2-03, 2)

1. We, we go up and down, that's when we, we, we braid it up first and then we put it in a tangle and then tie it up like that and then, and then do like that, and then your hair be looking pretty like Jolene's. Hers [Jolene's] is like that.

This explanation was, of course, accompanied by appropriate gestures. In response to the assertion that these children are unable to draw inferences, Item 3 gives three examples of the ability of two nine-year-old children to use logical inference.

3) Inference (Aubrey, 6-1-05, 4)

1. Five boys are left alone, and one of them is trying to peer through a poorly camouflaged door that separated the children from the recording equipment. The following dialogue takes place:

Aubrey (to Ernie, the boy peering through the door): Stop looking in there.

Ernie: That man [is] in there. (referring to the interviewer)

Aubrey: I wonder how come he didn't go through there.

Ernie: That ['s] the secret way.

Aubrey: I know. That's why he didn't want--don't want you to look through it. You old know it--nosy boy.

In this example Ernie correctly deduces that the children are intended to have no knowledge about the camouflaged door. And on the other hand, Aubrey correctly deduces that the interviewer indeed did not want Ernie to look through the door.

2. In the next example, Aubrey demonstrates an ability to use logical inference even though his conclusion is incorrect because of his lack of factual knowledge.

Interviewer (referring to the TV camera and addressing another boy): Yeah, that's a camera.

Aubrey: It's off now?

Interviewer: (noncommital grunt) Uhh.

Aubrey (Interpreting interviewer's response as an affirmative answer): Oh, when that camera be off the microphones be on?

Aubrey's reasoning is roughly the following: Let A be the proposition 'The TV camera is off.' and B be the proposition 'The microphones are off.' Aubrey reasons that A implies not B, i.e. $A \rightarrow \sim B$ (Aubrey, 6-2-5, 1).

Bereiter and Engelmann also claim (1966:42) that the so-called 'culturally deprived' child 'does not learn how to use language for obtaining and transmitting information. . . .' This claim was made regarding three- and four-year-old preschool children. Among samples taken from our five- and six-year olds, there are many examples in which these children exchange and ask for information about every conceivable subject. Item 4 gives an example of a six-year-old boy 'transmitting information' about how to make popcorn.

4) Transmitting Information (Bryan, 4-3-02, 3)

Interviewer: Now you tell me, how do you make popcorn?

Bryan: You have some seeds. And then you put'em in a pot and put a top over it. And then shake it up, and.... .

Second child (interrupting): It turn to popcorn.

Bryan: Popcorn.

In another example the interviewer attempts to elicit speech from the same child by asking for directions to get from school to the boy's home. The interviewer asks 'Which is the best way to get home?' to which the boy promptly replies 'Get in the car and drive home.'

If these five- and six-year-old children were as linguistically deficit at three and four years as Bereiter and Engelmann claim, it is incredible that they should make such dramatic gains in just one or two years. But if children can make such dramatic gains in a few years without educational intervention, the remedial language training which Bereiter and Engelmann espouse seems unneeded.

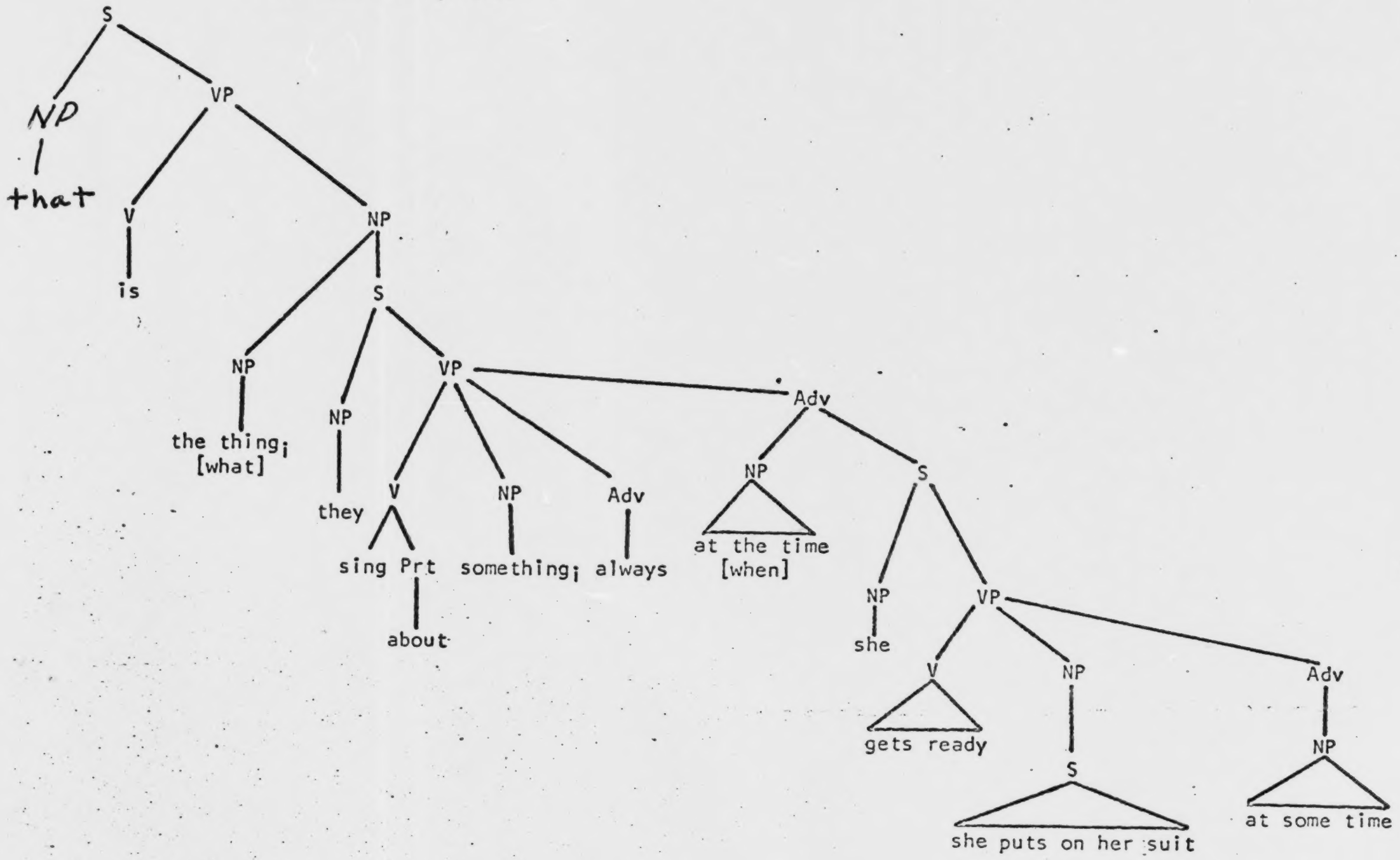
Bereiter and Engelmann further claim that the so-called 'severely disadvantaged child' is handicapped by a 'limited grammar' (1968:7). Since Bereiter and Engelmann do not define what they mean by 'limited grammar', it is difficult to react to these claims. However, one plausible interpretation of their claims is that these children speak in short, simple sentences. This interpretation is supported by noting the claims Bereiter and Engelmann make elsewhere (1966:34) regarding the speech of preschool-age children. They claim (1966:37) that children of this age speak in 'giant word units' because of the tendency of such children 'to fuse separate words into indivisible wholes. . . .'

According to Bereiter and Engelmann (1966:34) these 'giant word' sentences cannot be broken down into smaller parts, nor transformed from statements to questions, from imperatives to declaratives, and so on.

Bereiter and Engelmann also write that the 'culturally privileged child builds up his sentences by adding words to them as he masters them: from "Mommy read" to "Mommy read book" to "Mommy read me book" and eventually to "Mommy, I want you to read me this book."' On the other hand, 'The culturally deprived child grappling with such a sentence would probably start off with some amalgam like "re-ih-bu,"' with which he would then be stuck' (1966: 36).

Assuming, then, that by 'limited grammar', Bereiter and Engelmann mean that these children can utter only simple, short sentences, consider next Item 5. This tree diagram is the simplified deep structure of the sentence That's what they always sing about when she get ready to put on her batsuit, collected from six-year-old Maggie.

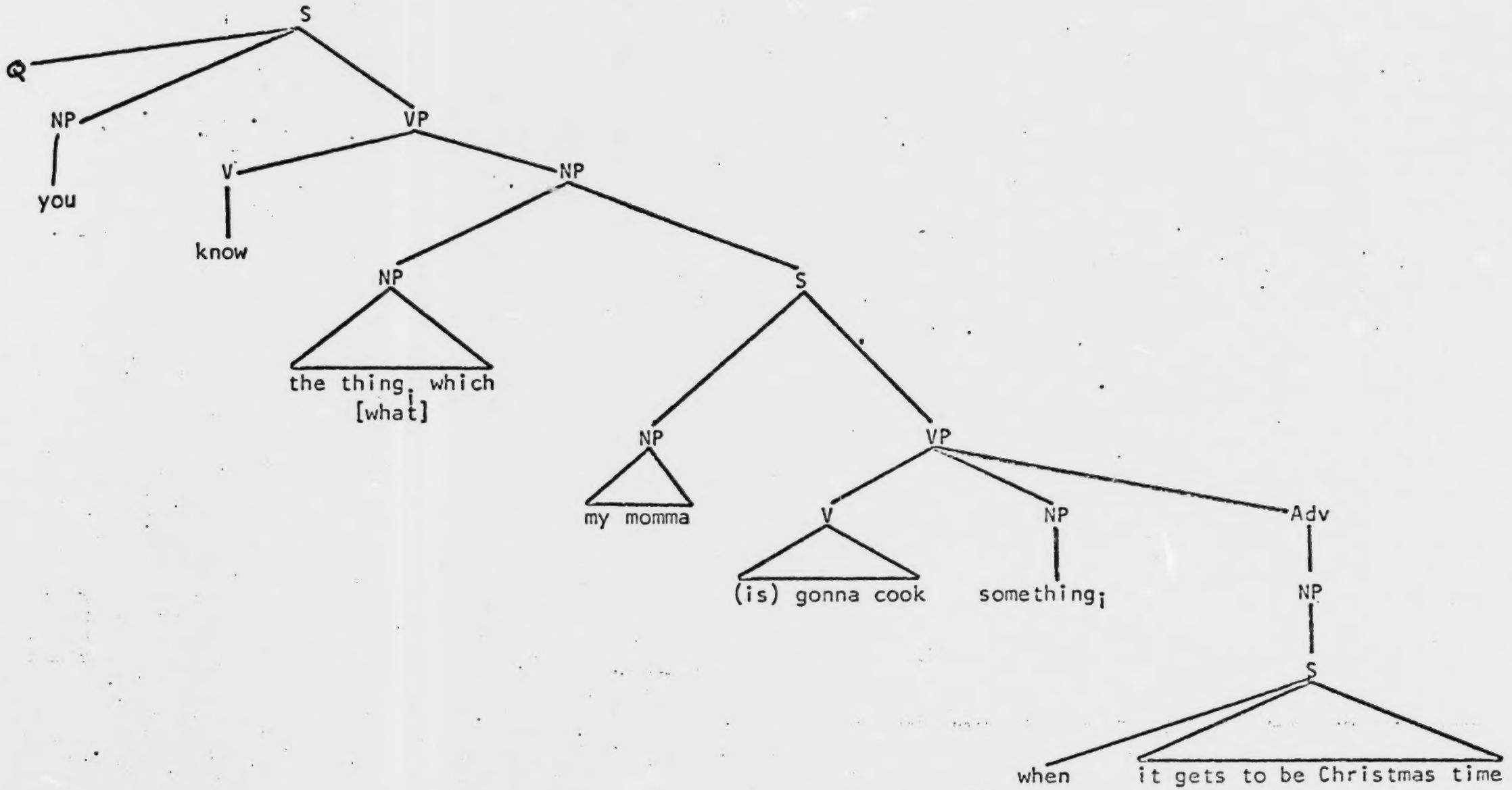
5) COMPLEX SENTENCE



That's what they always sing about when she get ready to put on her batsuit.

Notice the extreme complexity of this sentence: there are at least four (and probably more) embedded sentences underlying this sentence. Item 6 is another example of a rather complex sentence: You know what my momma gonna cook when it get Christmas time? This example was collected from a five-year-old child; other examples are given in Item 7.

6) COMPLEX SENTENCE



You know what my Momma gonna cook when it get Christmas time?

7) Other Complex Sentences

1. I'm going to just kick you right in your eye. (Thomas, 2-3-08, 5-6)
2. Maybe the boy be quiet after the girl be quiet. (Phillip, 4-1-03, 2)
3. Look. Look what's on my arm. (Caroline, 1-4-05, 1)
4. And that was the hardest, the hardest storm I ever heard of. (Brian, 4-3-02, 0)
5. I know who was saying that. (Thomas, 2-3-08, 21-22)
6. Barry, Barry he told me you will beat him up. (Thomas, 2-3-08, 21-22)
7. Because, I don't know why she won't let me play with them. (Mona, 1-4-03, 3-4)
8. Hey, what if you guys were singing that song in Spanish and that man heard you? (Diane, 5-1-05, 2)
9. You know when I went to the drive-in last time, and then you know those people they be dead, and then they wake up and kill people. . . . (Diane, 5-1-05, 5)
10. Hey, what if they try to kill us? (Fely, 5-1-03, 6)
11. Why don't that man come, cause I'm hot. (Fely, 5-1-03, 8)
12. Now go say what she say. (Caroline, 1-4-05, 1)
13. . . . tell her about why you got one. (Caroline, 1-4-05, 1)

14. He gonna bite you when he get big teeth, he gonna bite you. (Caroline, 1-4-05, 1)

15. I just want to know if I said it good. (Aubrey, 6-2-5, 3)

16. Granny's washing powder is the best one in the world. (Ernie, 6-2-03, 4)

17. The doctor said 'Get up, all you need is a piece of cornbread.' (Ernie, 6-2-03, 5)

18. See all you have to do is to raise that up. (Ernie, 6-2-3, 5)

None of the speech samples we have collected support the claim that these children have a tendency 'to fuse words into indivisible wholes.'

Bereiter and Engelmann make many other astonishing claims about the language of lower-class Negro and Mexican-American children. For example, they assert that many of these children understand only a few prepositions but are unable to use them correctly in their speech, that they are unable to handle negation in sentences, and that they 'do not know how to talk in loud, clear voices. They either mumble almost inaudibly or else they yell raucously' (1968:7). Although there is abundant evidence in our records to refute these claims, I wish now to offer an explanation for the vast incompatability between our findings and those of Bereiter and Engelmann. In our investigations at the Southwest Regional Laboratory, several different interviewing techniques were explored in order to determine the optimal method for eliciting casual, spontaneous speech from children. Essentially, three methods were used: individual interviews, paired interviews, and group interviews. In the individual interviews, children were interviewed by a single adult. In the paired interviews two children were interviewed by a single adult; and in the group interviews, the speech of children in groups of three to five was recorded with no adults present.

The results with the individual interviews were uniformly poor. Relatively little speech was elicited, and that was produced in a highly selfconscious, stilted manner, and tended to be monosyllabic and generally unresponsive. Even the most vocal children who had been interviewed earlier in group situations were constrained and nervous. The results with the paired interviews were mixed; in some cases the children were very talkative, in others they were again nervous and ill at ease.

If one's observations of children's conversations are confined to the material taped during the individual and certain of the paired interviews, the conclusions of Bereiter and Engelmann would follow. However, the data from the group sessions are incompatible with these claims. In the group sessions the children clearly manifested a command of their dialect and a great enthusiasm for communicating with others. They spontaneously related anecdotes about day-to-day events in their lives, told each other fairy tales, sang songs, asked riddles, and made side comments about the action going on around them. In short, behavior observed during the group interviews indicates that lower socioeconomic class black children possess a command of language thoroughly adequate to perform the normal human communication functions appropriate to their age.

The simplest explanation for the discrepancies between the observations made by Bereiter and his associates and SWRL staff is that the widely-held notion of the 'verbally deprived child' is a myth. Although Bereiter and Engelmann do not describe their interview techniques, it seems likely that they have erred in establishing a highly contrived interview situation for the lower-class child. They have apparently placed these children in an environment which is new and strange to them and then expected them to respond in the same manner as middle-class children who have greater familiarity with such situations. From our experience in eliciting speech from lower-class children, it appears to be of utmost importance that the children are given every opportunity to relax in an amicable environment. When these precautions are not taken, highly stilted speech resembling that described by Bereiter and Engelmann is obtained.

I would like next to consider an article by Arthur Jensen which appeared in a book dedicated, ironically enough, to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jensen has also argued for the uneducability of the lower-class child by assuming that 'It would be a mistake to think of language as merely a vehicle for thought; developmentally and functionally both are completely interdependent' (1968:119). This is merely an assertion, and there is a great deal of

evidence against this claim (Furth 1966, Lenneberg 1967). On the basis of earlier work (Jensen 1961), Jensen 'hypothesized that Mexican-American children of low social class come from a particularly nonverbal background.' Without informing us what he means by 'nonverbal background', Jensen concludes that these children have educational problems not because Spanish is spoken in their homes (while English is the language of instruction in the schools where his sample was taken) but because these children are developmentally retarded in a particular type of 'verbal mediation'. Since he considers language and thought to be 'completely interdependent' and since he further believes that the acquisition of this type of learning is 'the first stage that clearly sets the child apart from the lower animals psychologically,' Jensen in effect equates the lower-class Mexican-American child with the chimpanzee. For he writes that 'Until this stage of [verbal mediation] is reached, [any] child shows little superiority to the chimpanzee of comparable age' (1968: 132).

It is of interest to note here that Jensen is the author of a widely publicized paper (1969) in which he suggests that the failure of lower-class Negro school children is in part due to their genetic make up.

The Kerner Report distinguishes between two kinds of racism. The first kind is the classic Klu Klux Klan variety (well known to all). The second kind is a more subtle form that might be called institutionalized racism. This variety of racism is manifested when the social scientist enshrines canons of objectivity and academic detachment to a point where the meaningful or insightful study of human affairs is precluded, as Kenneth Clark notes in Dark Ghetto (1965). This type of racism springs from ignorance and insensitivity--the ignorance and insensitivity which William Labov implicates when he points out that teachers are being taught by the verbal deprivation theorists that the language of Negro children is 'unworthy of attention and useless for learning' (Labov 1969). In light of our work in Los Angeles and that of Labov and his associates in New York, it is clear that the conclusions drawn by Bereiter and Engelmann, by Deutsch, and by Jensen, stem from problem conceptualizations that are less informed and less sensitive than they need be if the educational problems of lower-class children are to be solved. No doubt these tendencies are inadvertent. Nevertheless, they do contribute to the substance of institutionalized racism.

It is not the educator's nor even the psychologist's primary professional responsibility to show how children learn, and use language. The primary responsibility for doing so belongs to

linguists. Therefore, it is linguists who must make it known, in the words of Labov (1969) that 'we are unanimous in condemning [the views of the verbal deprivation theorists] as bad observation, bad theory, and bad practice' (1969).[2]

Footnotes

[1]Revised and slightly expanded version of a paper presented at the Linguistic Society of America, San Francisco, California, December 29, 1969. The author wishes to thank Joseph F. Follettie for appreciable editorial contributions to this paper, and Stanley Legum and Evelyn Hatch for reading and commenting on an earlier draft.

[2]Papers written by verbal deprivation theorists appear with all too great a frequency in the following journals: Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders, NEA Journal, Child Development, Journal of Nursery Education, Journal of Educational Psychology, Journal of Social Issues, American Journal of Ortho-Psychiatry, Journal of Experimental Education, and any other of the numerous journals read by educational psychologists, teachers, and others concerned with the education of 'disadvantaged' children. Linguists may help combat institutionalized racism by exposing the linguistic naivete of the verbal deprivation theorists, and by making educators aware of the research being done in the field of social dialects. To help ensure that they are not exploiting social problems when conducting research among minority groups, linguists should sensitize themselves to the issues raised in Garcia, et al, (1969).

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